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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000214

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SUBJECT: Turkmenistan's Second President, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov

Reftels: (A) Ashgabat 21, (B) Ashgabat 199

Summary

1. (SBU) Interim President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov was installed as Turkmenistan's second president on February 14, after national election results were announced during a one-hour live broadcast meeting of the national People's Council. According to Central Election Commission Chairman Myrat Garryev, Berdimuhammedov received 89.23% of all votes cast during the national election on February 14. Berdimuhammedov re-affirmed his campaign promises during his inaugural speech, emphasizing his commitment to all terms of Turkmenistan's existing international (i.e., oil and gas) agreements. His prepared speech did not depart from or extend his familiar platform policies, though it did give a few additional specific details. In accordance with the constitution, Berdimuhammedov accepted the resignations of all ministers and Deputy Chairmen of the Cabinet of Ministers, but asked that they remain at their posts until he announced their successors; he replaced the Education Minister on February 16, and is likely to make more changes in the oil and gas sector. The day following his inauguration he reintroduced the tenth year of mandatory secondary-school education and a 5 year higher-education program. Berdimuhammedov treated the diplomatic corps and his government to a joyous banquet on February 19, the dual Flag Day/Niyazov's Birthday holiday, where he requested his typically dour "men in black" cabinet and guests to doff their suit jackets and join in with a local folk dancing troupe. Though homage still was paid to Niyazov, his epithet is being downgraded from "great leader" to "our first president." The solemn and entirely scripted inaugural event was unsurprising in format and displayed ample hold-over elements from the Niyazov regime, but the transition, in less than a week, to downplaying Niyazov and emphasizing a bright future will be accepted by most citizens here as valid and -- potentially -- a new beginning. End Summary.

Election Results

¶2. (SBU) The 2507 People's Council members were reportedly assembled at the meeting venue at 0400 on Inauguration Day, February 14. Obviously fatigued, Central Election Commission Chairman Garryev read his prepared explanation of the presidential election process with no unscripted editorial comments glorifying the process or the former president, as was standard for Garryev during the Niyazov era. After asserting that both the OSCE and the UN had an opportunity to learn about Turkmenistan's electoral process on February 11, he read the following election results, to little audience response:

Number of registered voters: 2,677,589

Turnout: 98.65%

Candidates' voting tabulations, read in alphabetical order:

Ammanniyaz Atajykov	3.23%
Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov	89.23%
Orazmyrat Garajayev	1.55%
Muhammetnazar Gurbanov	2.37%
Ishanguly Nuryev	2.38%
Ashyrniyaz Pomanov	1.31%

(Comment: The sum total is slightly over 100% of all registered voters, even before allowance for invalid ballots or voters who live abroad and could not vote. End Comment.)

The Halk Maslahaty Meeting

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¶3. (U) The six presidential candidates were seated front and center as honorary elder Myratberdi Sopiyevev opened the meeting by requesting Acting President Berdimuhammedov to preside. Berdimuhammedov declined the honor, and the motion to the Council was made and unanimously accepted for the Secretary of the Political Council of the National Democratic Party, Onjuk Musayev, to preside.

No new People's Council Chairman was elected to succeed Niyazov, who had held the post. Attending heads of state and senior diplomats were escorted in during the opening remarks. Musayev announced for unanimous confirmation the official attendance numbers, the meeting's agenda, and the 19 chairmen of the People's Council. The latter included the six presidential candidates, deputy ministers of the cabinet of ministers, Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov, two elders with the honorary title of "Hero of Turkmenistan," and leaders of public associations.

The Inauguration

¶4. (U) A small military cadre provided the inaugural accoutrements and shared the stage with Berdimuhammedov, who was otherwise alone, during his swearing-in. Berdimuhammedov laid his hand on the constitution and swore his allegiance to the people of Turkmenistan.

After reading the oath, he showed his allegiance to Turkmenistan by touching the national flag to his lips and forehead three times, an act used during some military swearing-in ceremonies. Garryev then presented Berdimuhammedov with a presidential certificate.

¶5. (SBU) The formal swearing-in was complemented by a cultural presentation of gifts to the new president. Honorary representatives from each of Turkmenistan's five regions presented the new president with a ceremonious necklace and offered congratulations. Additionally, the new president participated in four symbolic acts to ensure a positive future for Turkmenistan: standing on a white felt rug to start his presidency on a "successful and safe path," blessing Turkmen bread as a sign of prosperity, accepting a quiver of arrows symbolizing strength in unity, and touching the Koran and the combined Ruhnama and Ruhnama II volumes to his forehead to show national solidarity in shared values.

16. (U) At the conclusion of the ceremony, Berdimuhammedov accepted the resignations of all individual ministers and Deputy Chairmen in the Cabinet of Ministers, proffered before the Halk Maslahaty in a short speech "in accordance with the constitution" by Deputy Chairman for Oil and Gas Gurbanmyrat Atayev. Berdimuhammedov asked the ministers and deputy chairmen to remain until he appointed a new cabinet, and all agreed. The new president went down to shake the hands of the ranking foreign dignitaries seated in the front row, then took a seat between President of Ukraine Yushchenko and President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev for the follow-on musical concert.

Inaugural Address

17. (U) In his 12-15 minute inaugural speech, Berdimuhammedov praised the dignity and openness of the presidential election. He promised to serve faithfully, rely on the people, and obey the constitution. As he did in introducing his platform on January 3 (ref A), he undertook to continue the current social policies of providing free gas, electric power, water and salt, as well as subsidized gasoline, diesel, housing and medical care. He noted that new agricultural policies would be presented at the March 20 People's Council session. In other areas, Berdimuhammedov said his policies would be:

-- (Foreign policy): to continue Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality and commitments to the terms of all existing international agreements, including in the energy sector.

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-- (Education): to increase secondary education to 10 years, and work toward international recognition of Turkmenistan's secondary educational diplomas; to maintain the 3-language school-instruction policy (Turkmen, English, Russian); to add vocational training opportunities within secondary-school curricula; and to reintroduce physical education courses at the secondary level. At the university level: to increase the number of university students, augment institutions of higher education in the provinces, improve the overall quality of university education, and train more students abroad.

-- (Healthcare): to increase the number of doctors in hospitals, improve domestic medical education, build oncology and neurosurgical hospitals in Ashgabat, and increase the number of clinics and hospitals for mothers and children in the regions.

-- (Free enterprise, loans, job opportunities): to increase support for private companies and provide a favorable tax regime to encourage private enterprise; to continue to make more loans available for apartment mortgages as well as private house purchases; to increase job opportunities, looking in particular to the textile sector as a source of additional employment.

- (Transportation and communications): to upgrade transportation by purchasing more planes, trains and automobiles; to improve telephone networks, including cell phones, along with Internet access.

18. (SBU) The government broadcast live the arrival of each foreign delegation and posted the names of the senior delegation members on the front page of the state-run newspaper. Compared to the very recent past, Niyazov's cult of personality was in subdued appearance during the inauguration, though still prominent: on lapel pins (including Berdimuhammedov's), in Niyazov's immense stage portrait, in the inclusion of the Ruhnama adjacent to the Koran as part of the cultural inauguration, in references made by various speakers including Berdimuhammedov to continuing Niyazov's policies, and in the postage-stamp image on the upper-right corner of the state TV broadcast screen.

Decrees

19. (U) On February 15 Berdimuhammedov issued decrees mandating a return to 10 years of mandatory education and 5 years of higher

education in certain fields. On February 16 he appointed a new Education Minister (septel), and on February 19 he issued a decree on establishing a government commission to review citizens' complaints about law enforcement activities, a step widely viewed as preparing ground to address rule-of-law and corruption issues.

Flag Day

¶10. (SBU) Berdimuhammedov's administration literally went into full swing at the state banquet held in honor of the February 19 combined Flag Day/President Niyazov birthday event -- not typically an event warranting a state banquet. Berdimuhammedov invited the diplomatic corps, his government and representatives of Turkmenistan's main cultural institutions to a sit-down five course banquet in the presidential banquet hall usually reserved for state visits. Confidently striding into the room, Berdimuhammedov's first request was for the men to remove their jackets and relax, an abrupt departure from the typical Niyazov event wherein guests faced a dour phalanx of Niyazov's men in black and glumly counted the hours of drone-on speeches glorifying Niyazov. Instead, speeches congratulating Berdimuhammedov and welcoming a new era in Turkmenistan were punctuating with catchy dances performed by a local troupe, with government officials inviting diplomats and other guests to get up and dance. As hokey as this event may sound, the joyous mood was infectious, as if an enormous weight had been lifted.

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COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) No word or detail broke new ground in Berdimuhammedov's inauguration speech, which was plainly meant as a simple reaffirmation of his combined platform and stump commitments since his opening January 3 campaign speech. While this lack of new substance might disappoint the minority who had hoped Berdimuhammedov might use the occasion for a further modest demonstration of progressive intent, it is consistent with what we judge to be traditional Turkmenistan society's consensus expectation that change can -- and for safety's sake, probably should -- only proceed at a very deliberate, moderate pace. The flag-day event demonstrates an emerging cautious sense of optimism and hope for the future, sentiments heretofore alien to the average citizen of Turkmenistan. End Comment.

BRUSH